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ABSTRACT

Even after children enter school, parents continue to be the most important adult influence on their lives. This booklet, directed to parents, contains more than 40 ways that parents can work with their child's school to support their child's learning. The suggestions are organized in several sections: (1) "Parent Involvement: The 3 V's," visibility, volunteering, and voting; (2) "Partners in Your Children's Education"; (3) "More Basic than the Basics," delineating the basic skills parents teach their children, including self-confidence, a willingness to work, discipline, good nutrition, and good health; (4) "The Three R's," suggestions for encouraging reading, writing, and arithmetic skills; (5) "Beyond the Three R's," suggestions for enhancing children's education in the arts, social studies, science, and physical education; (6) "Helping Your Child Make the Most of Homework"; and (7) "Using Technology To Turn on Learning," focusing on television and the Internet. The booklet notes that it is most important of all that parents enjoy their children and let them know every day how special they are. (Contains 23 references.) (KB)

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Your Child's Most Important Teacher

You are your child's first—and most important—teacher. When you speak the first words to your infant son or daughter, *you are a language teacher.* When you help your child recognize shapes such as letters, *you are teaching reading skills.* Before your child enrolls in kindergarten, *you probably also teach math, science, social studies, the arts, and physical education.*

Even after your child enters school, you continue to be the most important adult influence on his[1] life. Most teachers see children only a few hours a day. Parents are constantly teaching their children.

But some parents seem to think that once a child enters school, the only "real" learning takes place there. Of course schools teach children much of the important knowledge they need, but parents play a critical teaching role in educating children. More than 30 years of research clearly shows that children learn best when schools and parents work as a team.

That's why the teachers and administrators of your child's school district have sent this book to you. It includes more than 40 ways you can work with your child's school to support learning. By cooperating, we believe we can make sure every child learns as much as he or she can.

You may already be following many of these suggestions — and that's great. You may decide others are not appropriate for your child, and that's fine, too. After all, you know your child better than anyone else. But we hope these suggestions will help you realize how much influence you have on your child's learning and even encourage you to try some new learning activities with your child.

We are sure you will enjoy learning with your child. So, good luck. And welcome to our "faculty."

[1] Because we believe in the importance of individuals, we often use the singular pronoun. To be fair, we alternate the use of "him" and "her" throughout this publication.

Parent Involvement: The 3 V's

How can you play a more active role in your child's education? Here are some ideas:

Be Visible

Attend parent conferences so you and your child's teacher can get to know each other. Join and support your school's parent organization. When children see that their parents think school is important, they think so too.

Volunteer

Parent volunteers make it possible for schools to provide many of the extra touches that can make the difference between a good education and a great one. Even if you are very busy, there's a job you can do. Studies show that children whose parents are school volunteers actually do better in school. So ask your child's teacher or principal what *you* can do.

Vote

Be an active, informed citizen. You'll be encouraging your child to be a good citizen. Because school boards make important decisions affecting your child's education, make a special effort to learn about — and vote in — school board, finance and other school elections.

Partners in Your Children's Education

Parents and teachers want the same thing for children — the best possible education. And when we work together, we make a strong team. Here are some ways you can help your child's school do a better job:

✓ See that your child attends school regularly.

✓ Support the school in its efforts to maintain proper discipline.

✓ Be aware of what your child is learning in school.

- ✓ Let the school know if your child has any problems outside of school that might affect his ability to learn.
- ✓ If you have concerns or questions about any aspect of the school, share them. Your child's teacher can often give you the information you want. Or, if needed, the principal, superintendent or other administrators are available also.
- ✓ If someone on the school staff has been particularly helpful to your child, let that person know. Everyone likes to hear good news now and then!

More Basic Than the Basics

You've probably heard educators talk a lot about the "basics." But as a parent, you are the one who teaches your child the basic skills that make learning possible. These skills include:

Self-Confidence

Children who believe in their own worth are better able to face the challenges of school. They are not afraid to make (and learn from) an occasional mistake. By letting your child know you have confidence in her, you're giving her the confidence that will help her have a successful school experience.

A Willingness to Work

Sometimes, parents think that school success depends on a child's natural "intelligence." But teachers say a ***willingness to work*** plays the biggest role in school success. If your child is struggling with a subject, give him encouragement by telling him that you know that if he keeps working at it he will succeed.

Discipline

Children whose parents have established clear and consistent rules for behavior at home have little difficulty adjusting to the specific rules of the school and the classroom. This makes it easier for them to focus and succeed.

Good Nutrition

One important way to help a child do better in school is to make sure she eats a healthy breakfast. Studies show that children who eat a good breakfast perform better in school than those who skip breakfast. It's your responsibility to see that your child eats a healthy diet that is low in "junk foods" such as sweets and potatoes and includes

✓ Dairy products,

✓ Vegetables and fruits,

✓ Breads and cereals, and

✓ Meat, poultry, fish or appropriate substitutes.

Good Health

Good health involves more than an occasional trip to the doctor. It also includes a good diet, and making sure your child gets enough exercise during the day and adequate sleep at night. It's also important to make sure your child has no hearing, vision, or dental problems — which often create learning problems.

When your child is ill, he should probably not attend school. But if he will be absent, please notify the school. If your child's illness lasts longer than a few days, the teacher may be able to send work home so he doesn't fall too far behind.

The Three R's

The Three R's: Reading

Children who are good readers have a head start in learning all subjects. Here are some ways you as a parent can encourage your child to read:

✓ **Read to and with your child.** Make story time a happy time. Believe it or not, the simple act of reading a book with your child is probably the most effective way to encourage your child to read independently. (Besides, reading with your child is fun.) Sometimes, stop while reading and ask questions: "What do you think will happen next?" "Why do you think the little girl in the story did that?"

Let your child choose favorite books most of the time. But occasionally, choose something a little more challenging. And encourage your child to read aloud to you by alternating paragraphs or pages.

✓ **Be a reading role model.** When your child is doing homework, read a book or a magazine. Talk about what you read with your child. Let your child see how you use reading in your job. All these are ways you can show your child that reading is an important part of life and is a "grown-up" activity.

✓ **Keep reading material handy.** Reading is a skill, and like other skills, it improves with practice. So make it easy for your child to read. Keep a book in the car so you can read to her while you're waiting in the bank line. Put a basket of magazines next to a comfortable chair by the TV as an alternative activity or on your child's bedside table so she can spend a few minutes reading each night to wind down before going to sleep.

✓ **Visit the library regularly and consider getting a library card for your child.** Public libraries offer a wealth of learning opportunities. While you're checking out books or magazines, you can also check out the other services that are available. Can you and your child use library computers to explore the Internet? Does the library offer special programs for children?

✓ If your child is just learning to read, **use every opportunity to encourage him to practice this skill**. Ask your child to read signs when you're out for a walk or a drive. Make labels for items in your house to help your child recognize the names of familiar objects.

✓ If your child is older, **start a parent-child book club.** A small group of parents and children can choose books to read and discuss together. Not only will you introduce your child to some wonderful literature (and rediscover some yourself), you'll also have a chance to have some in-depth conversations with each other.

The Three R's: Writing

The ability to express thoughts clearly in writing is an essential skill. In fact, many people argue that you don't really understand a thought until you can express it clearly in writing. Here are some ways to help improve your child's writing:

✓ All writing is based on spoken language, so **talk with — and listen to — your child.** As you share experiences and talk about them, you help your child develop an understanding of — and a love for — words, which will translate into better writing.

✓ **Let your child see you writing.** Don't let your child think that writing is something that only happens in school. Write letters to family and friends, business correspondences, and perhaps even an occasional story to share with him. Sometimes read what you've written and ask your child for his thoughts or suggestions. As your child sees you revising what you've written, he'll learn the importance of editing and revision to good writing.

✓ **Help your child write her own books.** She might choose to write about a special interest, such as a hobby. She could write about your family — perhaps interviewing an older family member and then translating that information into a book that will no doubt be treasured for generations. Once the book is written, encourage your child to illustrate it and make a cover. These books make great gifts for relatives and friends.

✓ **Encourage your child to write letters.** Even young children can write to friends and family. And older children can also write letters to companies and agencies to request information, samples, brochures, and so on. When they receive replies, they'll have an incentive to write again. Also, if you have a computer and access to the Internet, your child can use e-mail to write to family and friends and contact organizations.

The Three R's: Arithmetic

Some people think that in the age of the pocket calculator and the home computer, it isn't necessary for students to perfect mathematics skills. But children still need strong mental math skills (the ability to do math in their heads) so they can work with calculators and other technologies. After all, these technologies are only as accurate as the person controlling them. A calculator, for instance, can compute, but it can't think. Without a strong math foundation, children can't judge whether answers are correct. If a child accidentally multiplies 30 time 40 when trying to calculate 3 time 40, he needs to quickly realize that the calculator's answer — 1,200 — cannot be the answer he is after.

Here are some ways to foster mathematics skills in your child:

✓ **Help your child see how she uses math every day.** Does she look at the clock to see how many minutes remain before her favorite TV show? That's math. Is she figuring out how much she has to save so she can buy a favorite game? That's math, too.

✓ **Have your child help with family shopping.** A young child can identify numbers as you go up and down the aisles. An older child might add the cost of two or three items and determine how much change he should receive. (Let him buy these items — and if he has figured correctly, let him keep the change.) Still older children might use ads to compare prices and determine the best buys before going shopping.

✓ **Cooking is an excellent way to put math skills to work.** As children follow a recipe, they see the importance of following directions. When they use measuring cups, they see fractions at work. And best of all, everyone can enjoy the results!

Beyond the Three R's

You can help your child in other subjects as well. Here are some suggestions for enhancing your child's education:

The Arts

Many communities offer free performances for young people. Check your newspaper for a schedule of these events and attend them with your child. Don't forget performances at your local high school — these offer first-class talent at little or no cost.

Encourage your child to be a creator of art, not just a spectator. Provide a place to display your child's creations (this is why refrigerator doors were created). Keep a supply of paper, paint, crayons, and other art supplies to stimulate your child's creativity. Fill a box with dress-up clothes to encourage make-believe. Sing songs when you're in the car. Play tapes or CDs and ask your child to dance. Sometimes have your child tell *you* a bedtime story.

Social Studies

Family outings can teach your child about the world in which we live. These "outings" can be visits to a neighborhood across town, a local business, or a nearby park as well as a trip to another city or state. You can also learn about other cultures by checking out library books or using the Internet.

Talk with your child about differences in the ways people live. Ask your child to imagine what it would be like to live in a large city, or on a farm, or on the moon.

Watch the news with your child. Help your child find answers to the questions a particular news story raises. Read a story in the newspaper and compare it with the story on the television news. Choose a "Person of the Week" — a newsmaker, athlete, or entertainer — and encourage your child to learn all he can about this individual.

Make sure your child knows how to make and read maps. Have her make a map of how to get from your house to school, church, or a friend's house. Then follow the map to see if it's correct.

Science

Help your child become aware of the world. As you take walks or travel, take time to examine the rocks, plants, and animals that surround you.

Pay attention to the weather. Keep a graph of the high and low temperature every day for a month. Or, use the temperature listed in your local newspaper. Talk about the weather trends and what might cause them.

Help your child solve some "mysteries." Show him how a clock works (or give him an old clock to take apart). Talk about where the sun goes at night. Let your child plant a seed and watch it grow into a plant or a flower.

Do "Science in the Sink." Fill your sink with water. Gather objects from around the house. Ask your child to predict which will sink and which will float. Then test to see if she's right.

Physical Education

Encourage your child to spend at least a half hour each day in active play. This play can consist of either organized sports or an individual activity — jumping rope, in-line skating, jogging, or riding a bike.

Set a good example yourself. Make sure you get some vigorous exercise regularly. Exercise with your child — take a walk together, play a game, or put in an exercise video and work out together. You'll be helping yourself as well as your child!

Helping Your Child Make the Most of Homework

Provide a quiet, well-lighted place for your child to study. A desk is ideal, but a corner of the kitchen table before or after dinner is fine, too.

Establish a regular "homework time" in your home. During this time, there should be no TV, no radio, and no distractions. And be sure your child doesn't put off doing homework until she is too tired to concentrate.

Make sure your youngster has the "tools of the trade." These tools include pencils, paper, magic markers, scissors, tape, a ruler, and a *dictionary appropriate for her age. Keep all supplies in a specific spot* (preferably in a small box) where they can be easily located.

Help your child with time management. A long-term assignment may seem overwhelming. Work with your child to break it down into smaller, short-term tasks.

Most schools and teachers have a policy about how much time should be spent on homework each night. If your child consistently must spend much more or less time completing homework, contact the teacher about the discrepancy. Teachers can often provide enrichment activities or suggest better ways to study.

Encourage and support your child's efforts. Be available to take him to the library if they need to do research and to answer questions, but remember — the homework is your child's responsibility, not yours.

Using Technology To Turn on Learning

Television

By the time children are 18 years old, most will have spent more hours watching television than sitting in a classroom. Is all that television bad for kids? Well, yes — and no.

Television can transport children to places they could never visit on their own. It can bring them closer to the men and women who shape world events. So it can be a powerful learning tool.

But too much television can keep children away from reading, playing, and even just thinking. Studies (see www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content/TV) have found that when children who spend four or more hours watching television every day they:

✓ Don't work as hard in school.

✓ Don't read as well.

✓ Don't have as many hobbies.

✓ Don't play as well with friends.

✓ *Are more likely to have high cholesterol.*

✓ Are more likely to gain weight.

The wrong kind of television can be a problem, too. One of your jobs as a parent is to help your child use television wisely. Decide what the limits will be for your child's television viewing. Some families make a rule that there's no TV until homework is done . . . or none at all on school nights.

Take time with your child to plan her television viewing. At the beginning of the week, help her decide which programs to watch. You might give her "TV tickets" — each one good for 30 minutes of viewing.

The Internet

What's true for TV is just as true for the Internet. If your child is lucky enough to have access to a computer, he can communicate with people all over the world. But you need to set some limits on his Internet use.

Don't allow children to spend unlimited time online. They need to exercise their bodies, and they need time to play with other kids.

Make sure you know what your child is doing when he's online. It's a good idea to keep the family computer in a place where you can see what your child is doing without hovering over his shoulder.

Sit down with your child from time to time to see what sites he's visiting. Talk about how he can evaluate the information he finds online.

Be sure you provide alternatives to computers and television. Plan family outings — trips to the park or beach, picnics, visits to museums or zoos. And don't forget family conversations!

Enjoy Your Children

Most important of all, enjoy your children. Take a few minutes every day to let them know how special they are to you. And have fun helping them learn. It's good for the whole family.

Resources

Excellent new resources for parents are published every day. Here are some publications, organizations, and online resources available to help you help your child succeed in school.

Organizations

American Academy of Pediatrics has several health-related publications for parents, which can be found on the Internet at www.aap.org.

Communities in Schools, America's largest stay-in-school network, offers resources and ideas for helping America's communities help students at www.cisnet.org.

The Family Education Network offers many ideas for parent/school partnering at www.familyeducation.com.

KidsCampaigns is an information and action center for adults who want to make their communities work for children. It can be accessed online at www.connectforkids.org.

National PTA, National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs. The National PTA also has a number of publications designed to help parents play a more active role in their children's education. These are available online at the PTA's Education Resource Libraries, at www.pta.org.

U. S. Department of Education has many free publications for parents on a wide range of subjects. They are available by calling 1-800-USA-LEARN or on the Internet at www.ed.gov/pubs/parents.

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Thoughts to Remember

Thoughts to Remember

Other books in AASA's Parents: Partners in Education Series

The following titles are also available in AASA's Parents: Partners in Education Series. This series includes updated versions of long-term best-sellers as well as several new titles, all published in 1999.

- *106 Ways Parents Can Help Students Achieve*
- *Getting Your Child Ready for School*
- * *Helping Your Child Succeed in Elementary School*
- * *Helping Your Child Succeed in Middle and High School*
- *Helping Your Child With Homework*
- * *Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Skills: Keys to Your Child's School Success*

* These titles available in October 1999.

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